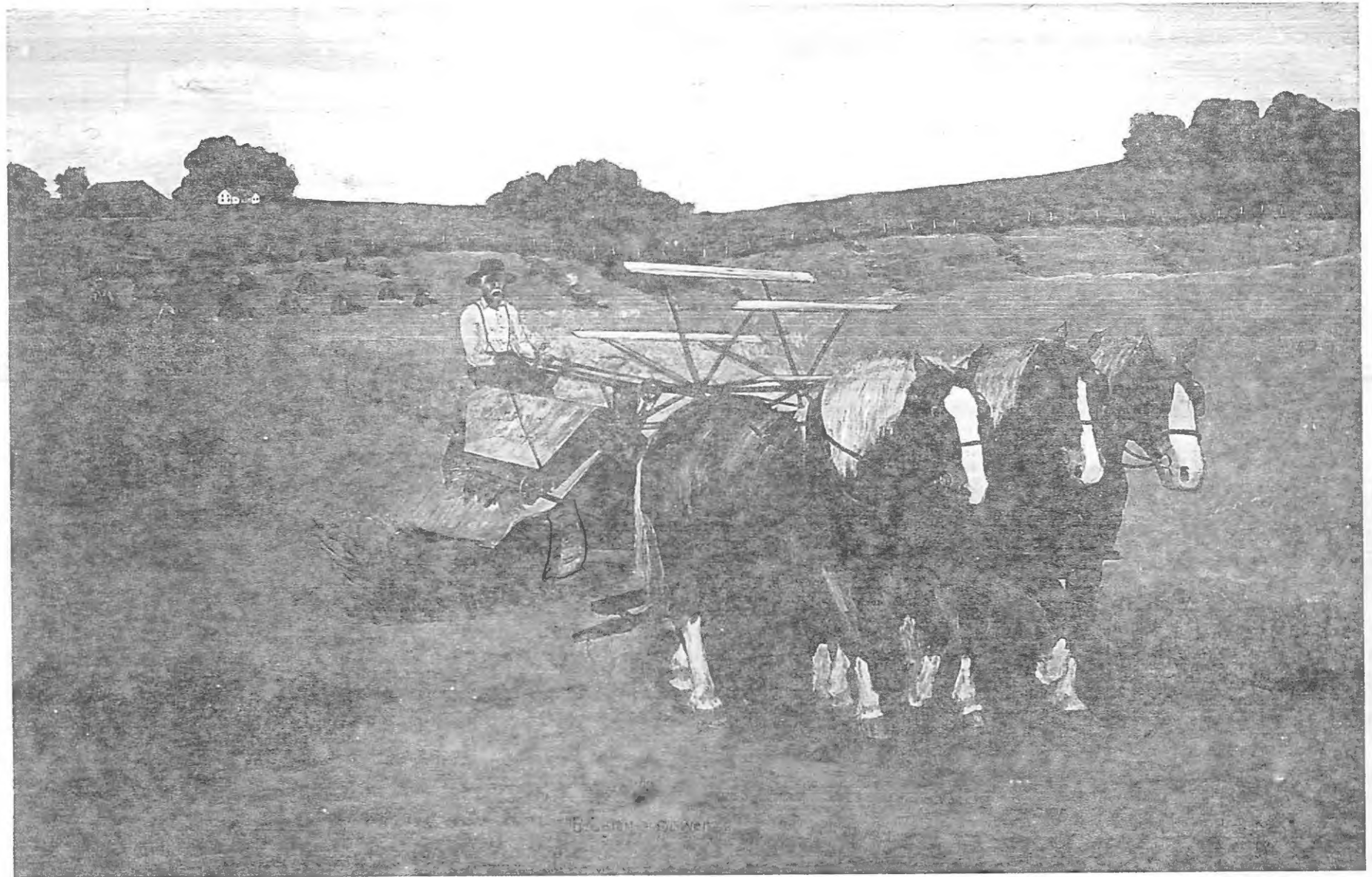


# THRESHING DAYS

The Farm Paintings  
of Lavern Kammerude



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## The Farm Paintings of Lavern Kammerude



TEXT BY CHESTER GARTHWAITE

Introduction by James P. Leary

WISCONSIN FOLK MUSEUM

Mount Horeb, Wisconsin  
1990



LAVERN KAMMERUDE (1915-1989)



*One-room Einerson School, which Lavern attended, just up the road from the Kammerude's farm. Photo ca. 1930.*

one journalist, he had "always loved to draw horses. I started out when I was just a kid. I always drew pictures. We never had art in the one-room school I went to, but I did more drawing of horses than what I was *supposed* to be doing." Now in his fifties, Lavern started dabbling in painting. To encourage him, his mother also enrolled Lavern in the Famous Artist Correspondence School which critiqued his early efforts through the mail.

Evenings after work in Argyle found him setting up an easel in a backroom, meditating on a subject, blocking out and sketching sections of his painting-to-be on masonite purchased from the local lumberyard, then daubing color with tiny brushes grasped in his large rough worker's hands. He showed his first paintings to Hank Anderson, proprietor of Hank's Tavern in Argyle, a place where Kammerude and fellow workers stopped for a quitting-time beer. Anderson bought seven or eight and hung them on the wall. Other locals did the same and Kammerude was soon exhibiting in a Blanchardville art show.

His most enthusiastic customers were farmers and businesses serving a rural clientele. In 1970 Farm Credit Services bought paintings to hang in their offices, as did Surge, a leading dairy equipment supplier. While many customers might request simply a portrait of their homeplace, perhaps supplying a photograph, others were more captivated by Lavern's talent for recalling a bygone way of life. In 1977, Gerald Regan, a Surge executive and a former farmboy from nearby Mineral Point, was taken with Lavern's scenes of corn harvests and cheese factories. Regan's interest in old farming practices led him to commission scenes over the next dozen years that applied Kammerude's penchant for detail to a broad range of seasonal rural activities.

Eventually acting as Kammerude's agent, Regan began bringing the retired farmer's work, through the sale of prints and originals, to the attention of regional and national galleries, buyers, dairy farming and country living publications, and cultural institutions. Soon a Kammerude painting graced the walls of the United State's Secretary of Agriculture and, in 1986, with the help of the Wisconsin Arts Board's Folk Arts Program, Lavern Kammerude was awarded a "Governor's Heritage Award" by chief executive Anthony Earl for his renderings of old-time rural life.

In 1987 Kammerude retired at seventy-two after twenty years at Argyle Industries. He could finally paint as much as he wanted. Mildred Kammerude remembers:

I always told him artists are moody, and when the mood took him he'd paint. Sometimes he'd get up early in the morning and he'd start painting in the morning—I would have to call him to lunch. Then other times he would sit all afternoon and not do a thing . . . Everything was thought out before . . . Everything was in his head . . . And then [he would] just get up and walk out [to his backroom studio] and paint until he got tired at night.

Similarly, Gerald Regan recalls:

Lavern was a genius. He had all that detail stored up here [in his head]. And he'd sit there, almost in a trance in front of one of his paintings—with a paintbrush in one hand and a cigarette in the other—and just stare at it for a long time as if he was in a different world. Which he was.





*Lavern with horse, 1965.*

Lavern Kammerude died in September, 1989, of blood poisoning complications following a yard accident. At his funeral in a packed Blanchardville church a sheaf of grain was displayed along with an unfinished painting, dual symbols of the life of a farmer and artist.

Lavern Kammerude painted what he knew and never thought his work was anything special. He was happy if others enjoyed what he did, but all the attention, the "hoopla," that came his way was disconcerting. When he received his 1986 Heritage Award in the gilded Governor's reception room with its fine art decor and murals, all he said in accepting was that it seemed

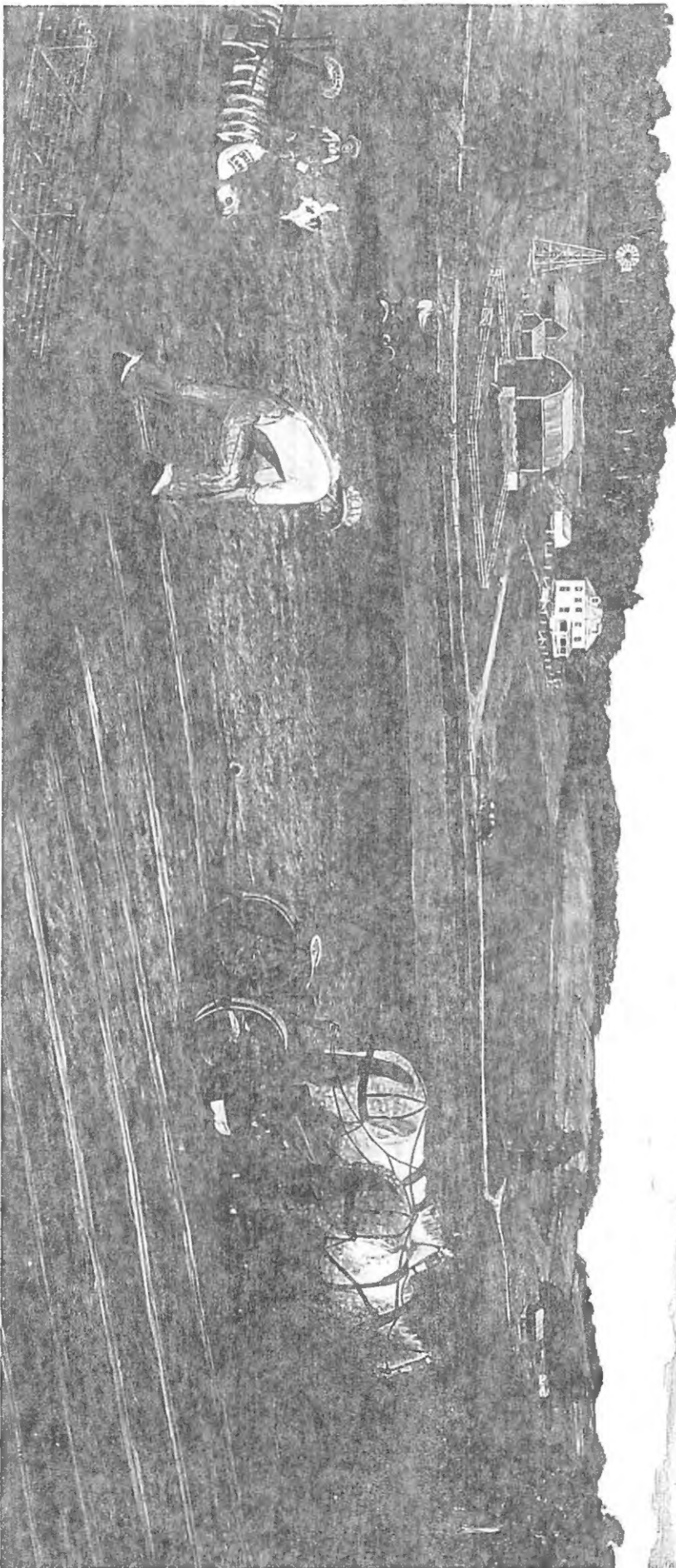
"like a lot of fuss to make over an old guy like me." But those who admired his paintings knew how special they were.

The paintings concern rural life in southwestern Wisconsin from Kammerude's boyhood in the late 1910s through roughly the mid-1940s. During most of that period the family farms of this hilly region of the state were small, diversified, reliant on horse power, and dependant upon local markets. For the exchange of labor and the enjoyment of sociability, farm families were also aligned in informal neighborhoods. When Lavern was farming, the Kammerudes did their "neighboring" with the Corbins, the Daleys, the Bergs, the Kainzes, and the Jacobsons. Their kids went to the country school up one hill and hauled milk to the cheese factory up another. Neighbors enjoyed a beer together at the tavern, polkaed and waltzed to old-time music in home and hall. The country church that grandfather Ole Kammerude helped found was a short ride away. For those families, farming was more a way of life than simply a way to make a living—more agriculture than agribusiness.

Nowadays farming is more specialized. Automated machines have replaced horses, markets are global, and neighborhoods are no longer intact. Country schools have been abandoned to consolidation, country cheese factories have been shut down by economics and regulations. House parties and family taverns have diminished in competition with entertainment media. Some country churches hold on, sharing ministers with nearby congregations, while the rest have been converted to other uses, or simply abandoned.

Lavern Kammerude experienced all these changes, like most farmers, without resistance. Yet he knew that farming would never again be what it was when he was a boy and a young man. He missed working with horses so much that he kept some around to race. And he especially missed the experience of working, consulting, and visiting with the folks across the fence or down the road whose families were farming too. "There was a lot more togetherness then . . . As the years went on you didn't even know your next door neighbor."

Through his paintings, Kammerude expressed appreciation of his lost world by concentrating on the seasonal occasions when neighbors gathered to work, play, trade, worship, and work some more. His portrayal of the intricacies of communal labor and of the equipment used to carry it out was extraordinarily precise. Through painting, he could recollect and relive the past: "I've done it and I can see myself there." Mildred Kammerude noted



## The Blacksmith Shop

This springtime painting of a little crossroads community with a blacksmith shop, livery stable, and saloon recalls facets of village life in the 1920s. A modest settlement like this served not only the needs of its inhabitants but also those of surrounding farms.

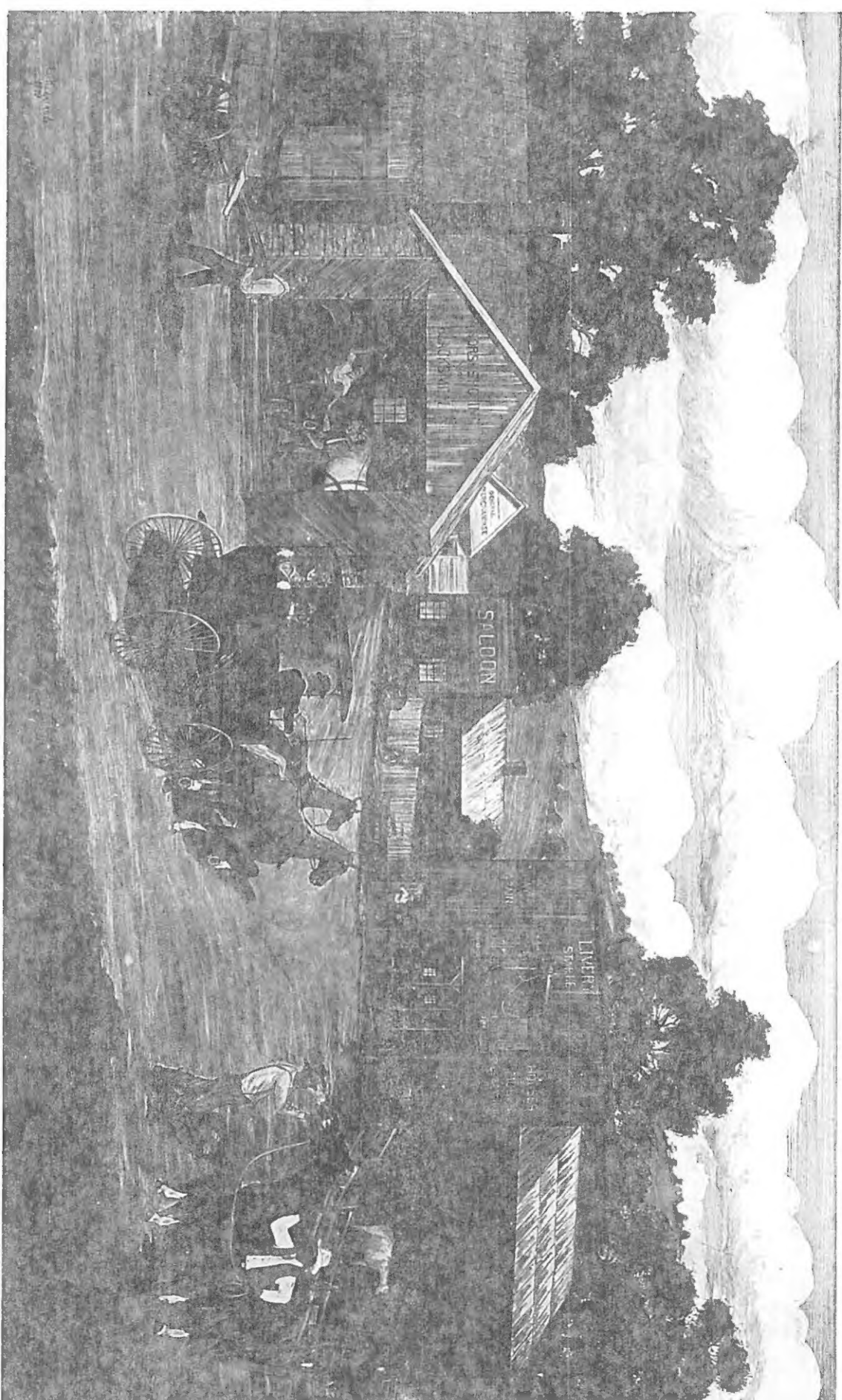
The scene focuses especially on the blacksmith shop. In those days, light breeds of horses provided transportation for farm folk coming to town and for townspeople like doctors, clergy, and postmen who went out into the rural areas. On the farms, draft horses provided power to run machinery and field equipment. Accordingly, the village blacksmith shop was always a busy place.

The local blacksmith was trained as a farrier, one who shoes horses. Many a young blacksmith worked first as an apprentice for several years before being allowed to establish an independent business. At least in this part of the country, it seems that many of the skilled blacksmiths were of German origin. Incidentally, the term "farrier" means "foot-doctor" and is recognized by the veterinary profession. The theory "when the foot is gone, the horse is gone" made horse shoeing an exacting science.

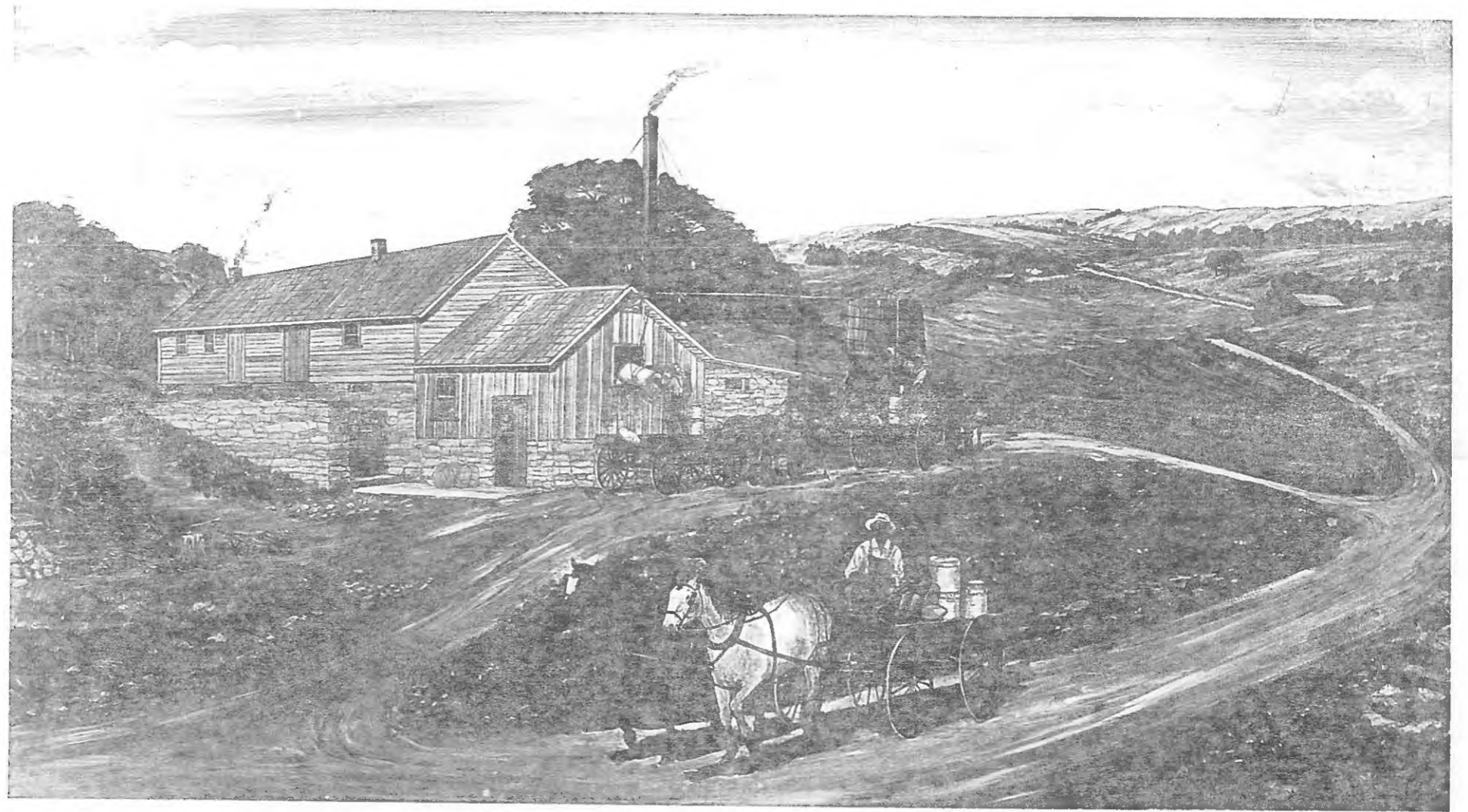
When a team was brought in to be shod, they were tied, with heads held high, to rings attached to the wall. Harnesses were seldom removed. The blacksmith would select shoes of approximately the correct size, which he had made in his own forge. After the hooves had been rasped to an absolutely smooth surface, the rough shoes would be heated in the coal forge until they were a glowing yellow. The forge was heated rapidly by using a "bellows" that was operated either by hand or foot to force oxygen under the coal, causing the fire to burn fiercely. Then the shoes would be hammered on the anvil, mounted on a huge block of wood, to the exact shape of each hoof.

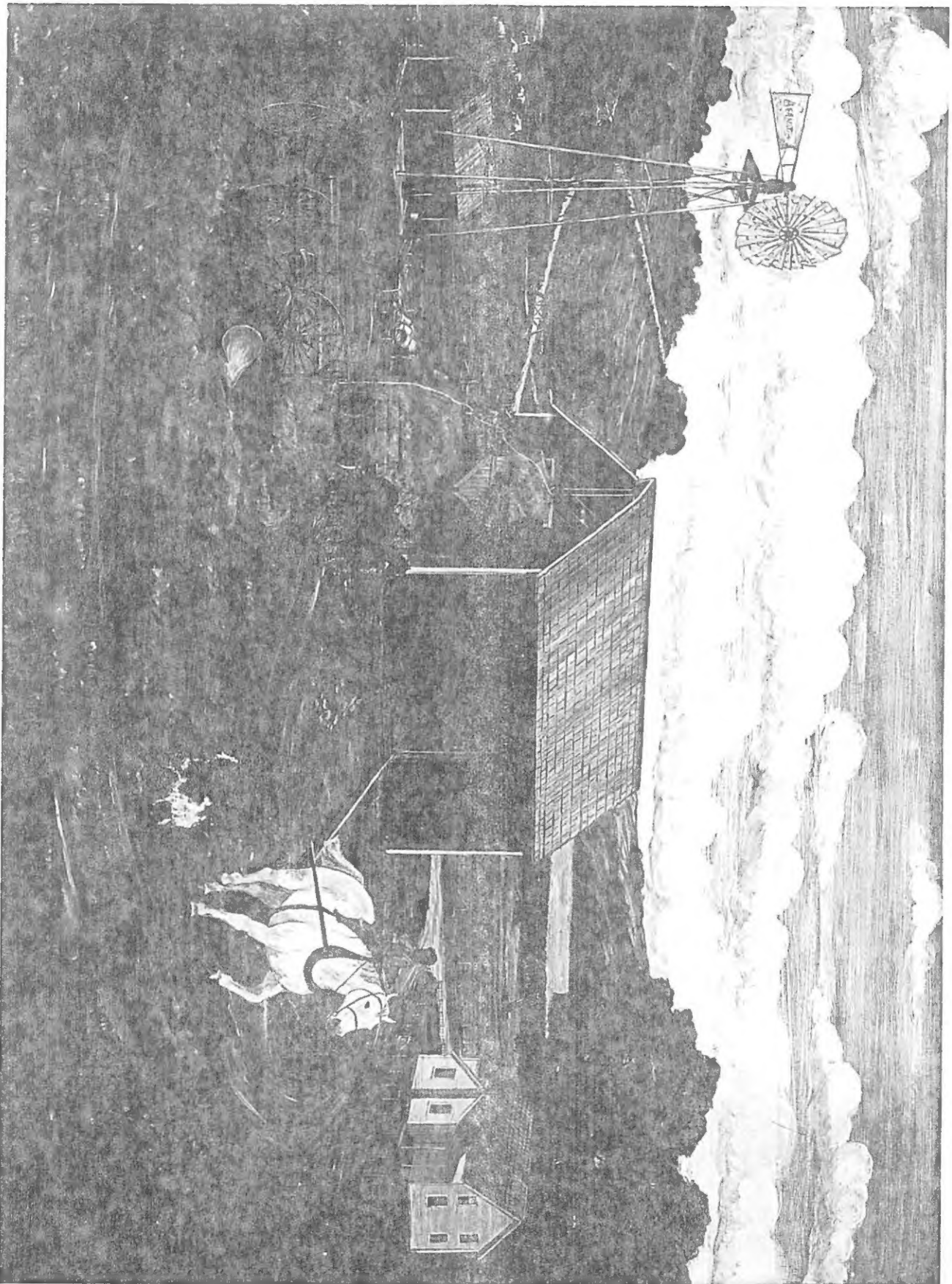
Normally a horse shoe had four nail holes on each side. Each hole had an indentation the size of the nail head, made while the steel was heated. This allowed the nails to be set in flush and prevented heads wearing off with constant road contact.

While shoeing, the blacksmith always wore a heavy leather apron or leggings over his normal trousers. A nervous or ill-tempered horse might jerk a foot through the legs of the blacksmith as he straddled the animal's leg. If the nails had not yet been clinched it would cause a serious wound without the leather leggings. When a horse was being shod for the first time or was bad-tempered, the owner frequently was assigned to place a "twich" on the horse's nose to





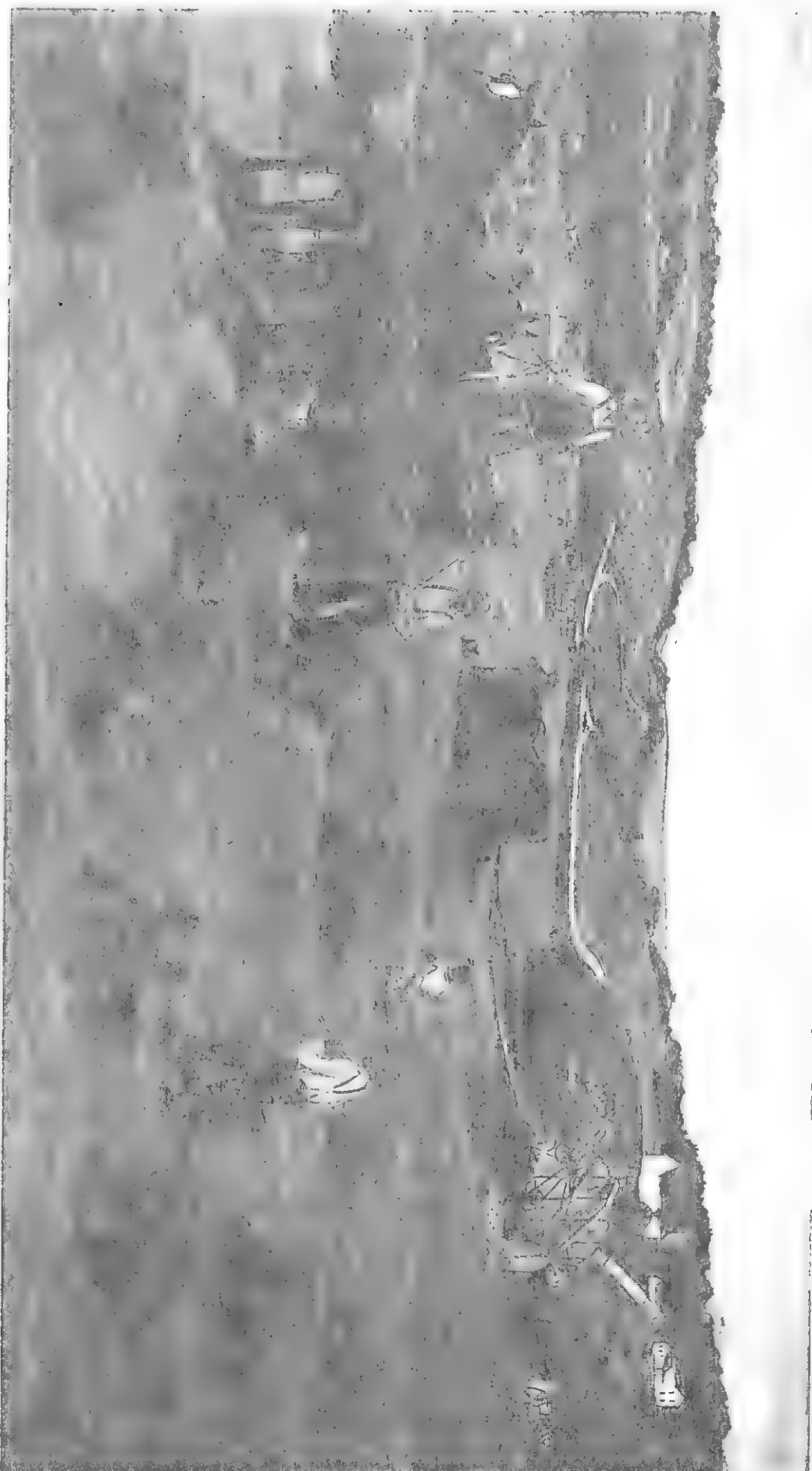














## Steam Power

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This painting depicts a somewhat earlier threshing scene. Here, an old-fashioned steam-powered tractor is hooked up to the threshing machine. Elderly farmers alive today may have seen threshing rigs like this when they were relatively young, but were probably not old enough to be an operator. Mr. Kammerude himself admitted he was only old enough to be allowed to drive the team on the tank wagon.

Simply, the steam engine on a tractor like this used the expanding pressure of steam to drive a piston. The piston forced wheels to revolve. The huge steel "fly-wheels" served in turn to drive the belt pulley. As the fly wheel developed a high number of revolutions per minute, it provided smooth power, in case several bundles were thrown into the feeder at once.

A steam engine like the one pictured here was seldom owned by an individual farmer. These were owned by custom operators who traveled around the farm communities to do threshing and shredding. The farmers would build huge stacks of bundles, with the "butts" or ends of the stalks facing out, for shocks would deteriorate before the threshing equipment arrived.

Notice in the painting that a small pile of coal has been dumped on the ground behind the engine. Very likely a team and wagon is on the way to the nearest railroad warehouse to obtain a fresh load. Wood was seldom used for fuel in the smaller, portable engines. It was essential that the operator get the fire going early in the morning so that water could be heated to boiling point by starting time.

You will notice also a steel "tank wagon" parked beside the rear wheel of the engine. Very rarely would a farmer have sufficient water available to fill the tank. Therefore, the tank wagon would be pulled to a local pond and several men would wade in, stationing themselves within reach to pass buckets to fill the tank. It was necessary to scoop water gently to prevent sediment deposits, which would eventually plug the valves.

By present standards the steam engine was a clumsy, time-consuming piece of equipment. It had a very crude steering mechanism, the brakes were not sensitive, and there was always an element of danger with a fire of this size that straw might be ignited. Most operators were very cautious in this regard. They seldom felt comfortable close to buildings, as the painting indicates. The exceptionally long drive belt also was a safety precaution. This belt was made of canvas with applications of tar applied to keep the belt from slipping on the steel drive wheels.





## The County Fair

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Probably few celebrations have changed less over the past fifty years than our county fairs. Occurring in late August and early September, these gatherings were a chance to display the fruits of the harvest and show off prized livestock. A fair also encouraged a farm family to set aside time, while the weather was still pleasant, to relax and enjoy a brief respite after the hard labors of long summer days.

The grandstand, buildings, and landscape depicted here seem to include elements from the three fairgrounds nearest to Mr. Kammerude's farm: the nearby Green, Lafayette, and Iowa County fairs. The activities shown are typical of county fairs for earlier decades, but a few aspects, such as somewhat modern harness-racing equipment, seem more recent than in other paintings.

Horse-racing has long been a favorite pastime for country folk in Wisconsin, and Lavern Kammerude himself kept a few horses for this sport. At county fairs, harness-racing is very much a family hobby, with drivers and grooms often getting involved at young ages. Within a given region, nearly all the participant families would get to know each other quite well. They enjoyed meeting and competing season after season at the various fairs.

It is obvious that the grandstand is filled with an appreciative audience. The judges and announcers are in the elevated stand with the wire stretching across the track to the amphitheater. The first horse's nose to come under the wire was the winner of that "heat," with the time measured with a stopwatch. Between heats a wide drag was pulled around the track to smooth the surface dug up by the hooves of straining trotters and pacers.

In the grandstand hundreds of people will be filling out scoring sheets—betting who will win the next race. Youngsters will circulate through the stands collecting the sheets, then a drawing is held in the judge's stand. The lucky person who selected the winner will receive a locally donated prize.

Horses are assigned to different races by age group or capabilities. Notice that while one race is being finished, other horses are being hitched to "sulky" racing carts in preparation for the next one. The facilities for stabling the horses are rather modest here, though more permanent ones may be nearby.

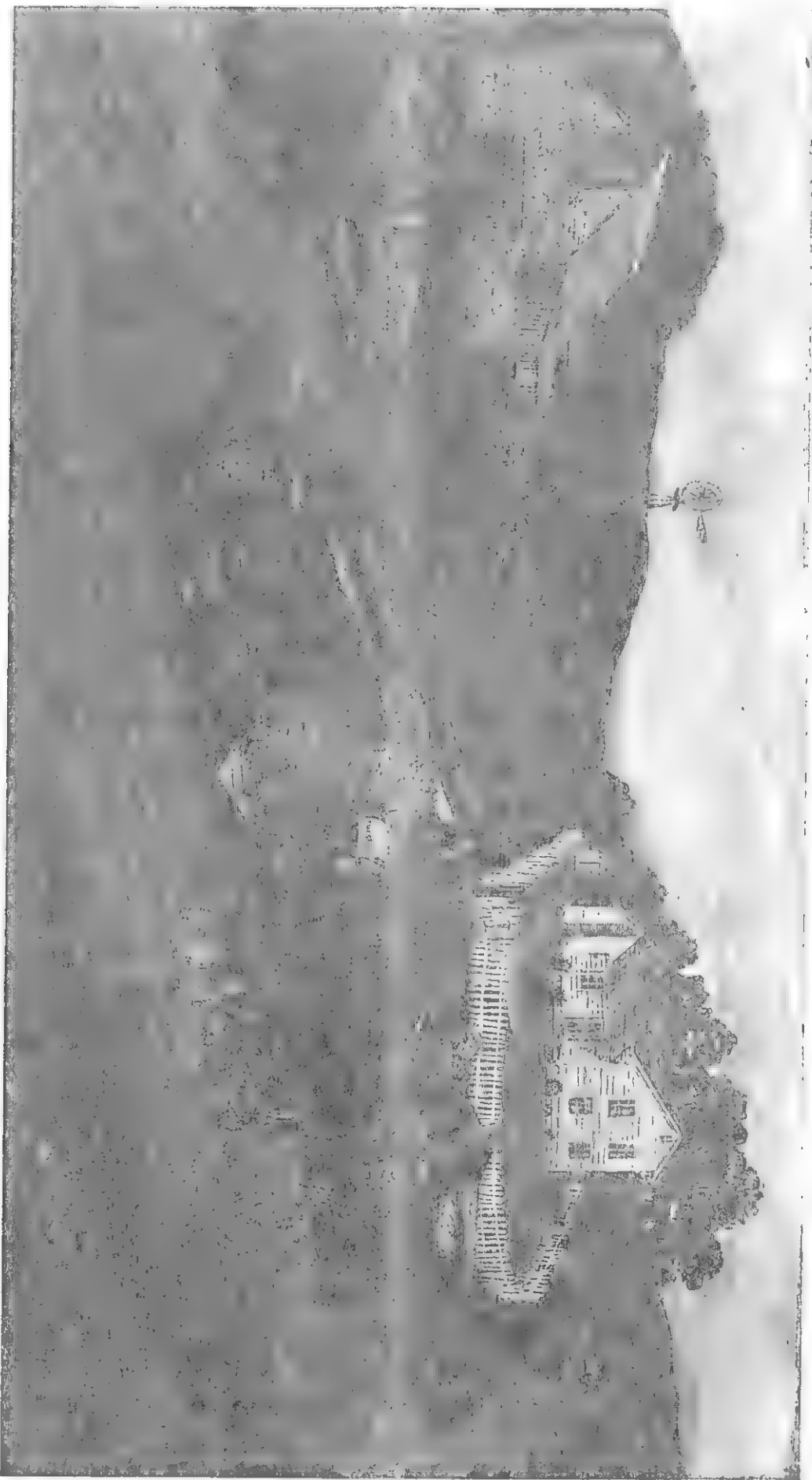
For the youngsters, the old-fashioned Ferris Wheel and Merry-Go-Round will be in nearly constant motion. For present-day fairs, the entertainment rides are brought in by professional companies who specialize in providing mid-way amusements. Liability insurance has caused local fairs to discontinue using their own equipment.

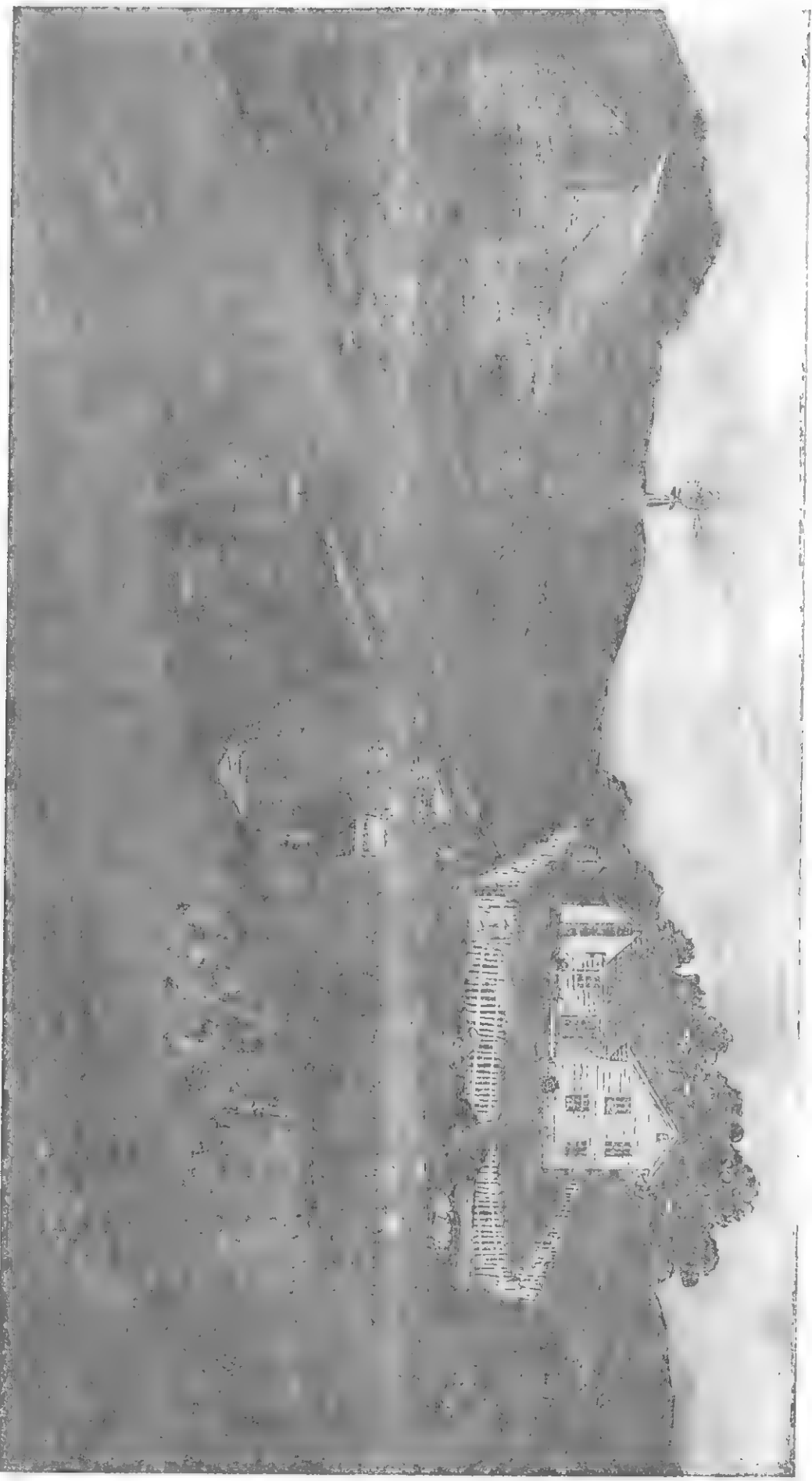


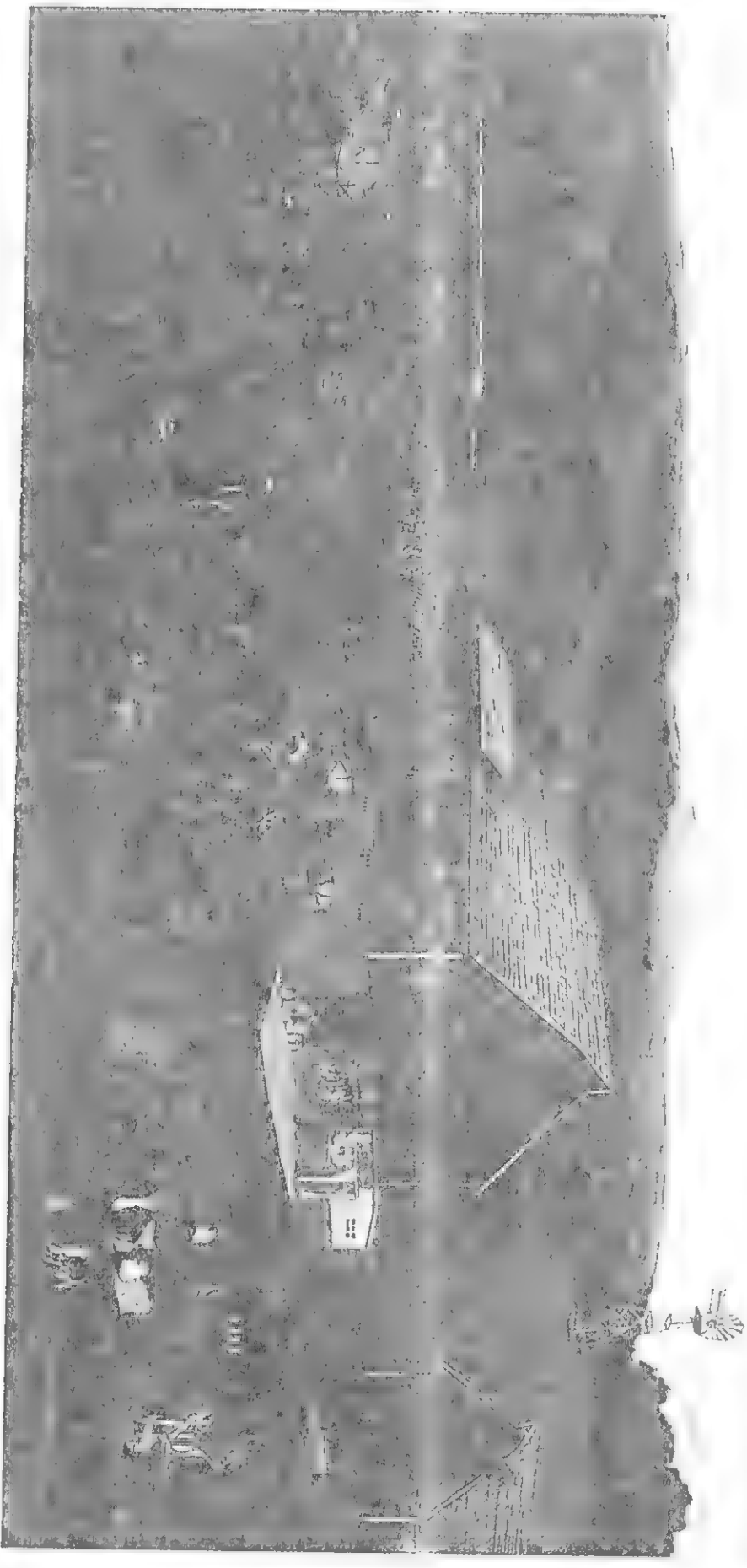






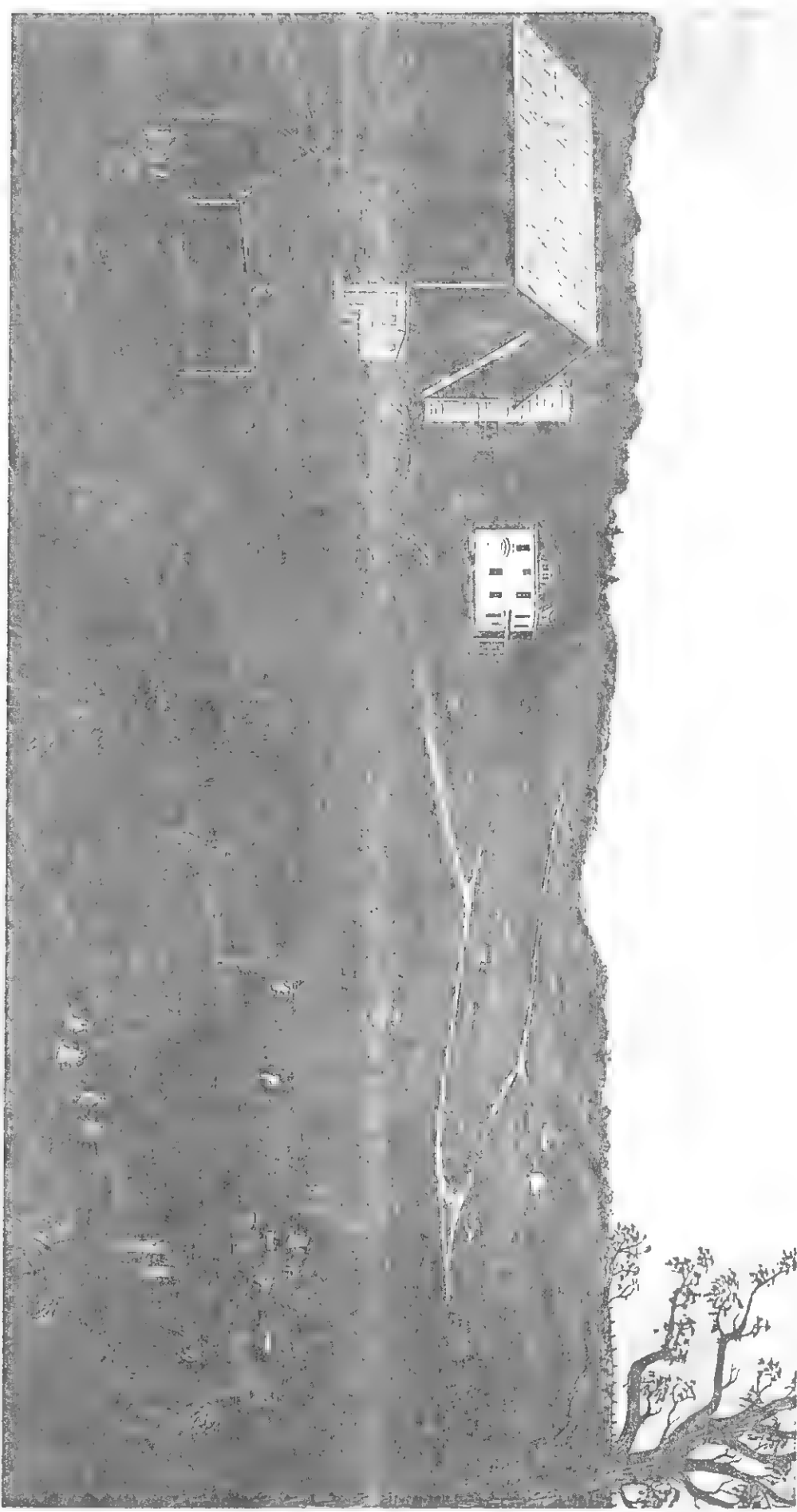














## Wood Cutting Bee

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This winter scene shows neighbors working together to saw firewood. The harvesting of wood was not solely for use during the cold months. Consider for instance that throughout the entire year the old kitchen range had to be fueled with split wood. Certainly, however, the Wisconsin winters were the main cause of large woodpiles being gobbled up, as wood-burning stoves and furnaces did their best to keep farmhouses warm and cozy through the coldest time of the year. This required many armloads of wood, as those who had to carry it will recall.

In this painting we are observing only the final process of wood-cutting, in which the poles are cut into blocks. There had been many weeks of labor before this final activity. For a wood crew, there were fewer men involved compared to threshing and shredding. With heavy farm chores and shorter daylight hours, often such a crew would operate only in the afternoon. Sometimes, however, they would assemble earlier, if it was necessary to take the portable saw mill to a distant woods.

There were a number of factors in the selection of wood used for fuel. Every year in a timber lot a few trees die, either from lightning or disease. Those would be used first, since they were dry wood. To cut large timber, two men with a cross-cut saw were needed to drop trees and cut them into sections. A well-shod team then skidded the trees to a clearing where branches were cut off and the trunks cut into manageable lengths. Also, it was safer to have two men present, in case of an accident. The bigger logs were then split with wedges, so that a couple of men could lift them.

Another source of wood was generated if the farmer had cut a number of saw logs to provide lumber for a needed farm building. All the largest branches and any crooked logs not suitable for lumber were available for fuel. In this case, it was necessary to dry the wood for a year.

A third possibility was that the farmer needed farm land more than timber, so he would "clear cut" about one-fourth acre. The first year or two, that piece of new land would be used as the family potato patch, until the stumps could be removed and the land added to a field.

Also, every section of timber had some "weed" trees like box elder or wild cherry that had little value. Although not so popular as fuel either, these trees were still used.



L. Kneeland  
1888





## Maple Sugaring

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The maple sap "run" of the months of February and March is a traditional harvesting of one of Wisconsin's sweetest crops. With snow on the ground, yet sun in the sky, the men in this picture will have a busy day going from one tree to the next to collect the buckets of light golden sap, filled drop by drop over the past hours.

Maple sugaring is among the oldest food-gathering activities known to inhabitants of the state. Even before white settlers arrived in the region, Woodland Indian tribes were using maple sap to make sweet syrup. The Indians collected the sap in tightly-sewn birchbark baskets from gashes cut in maple trees. To cook the light liquid down to a heavier consistency, they placed heated stones into the sap, held in either larger birchbark containers or wooden troughs. The heat from the stones evaporated the water until the sap became thick syrup or crystallized sugar.

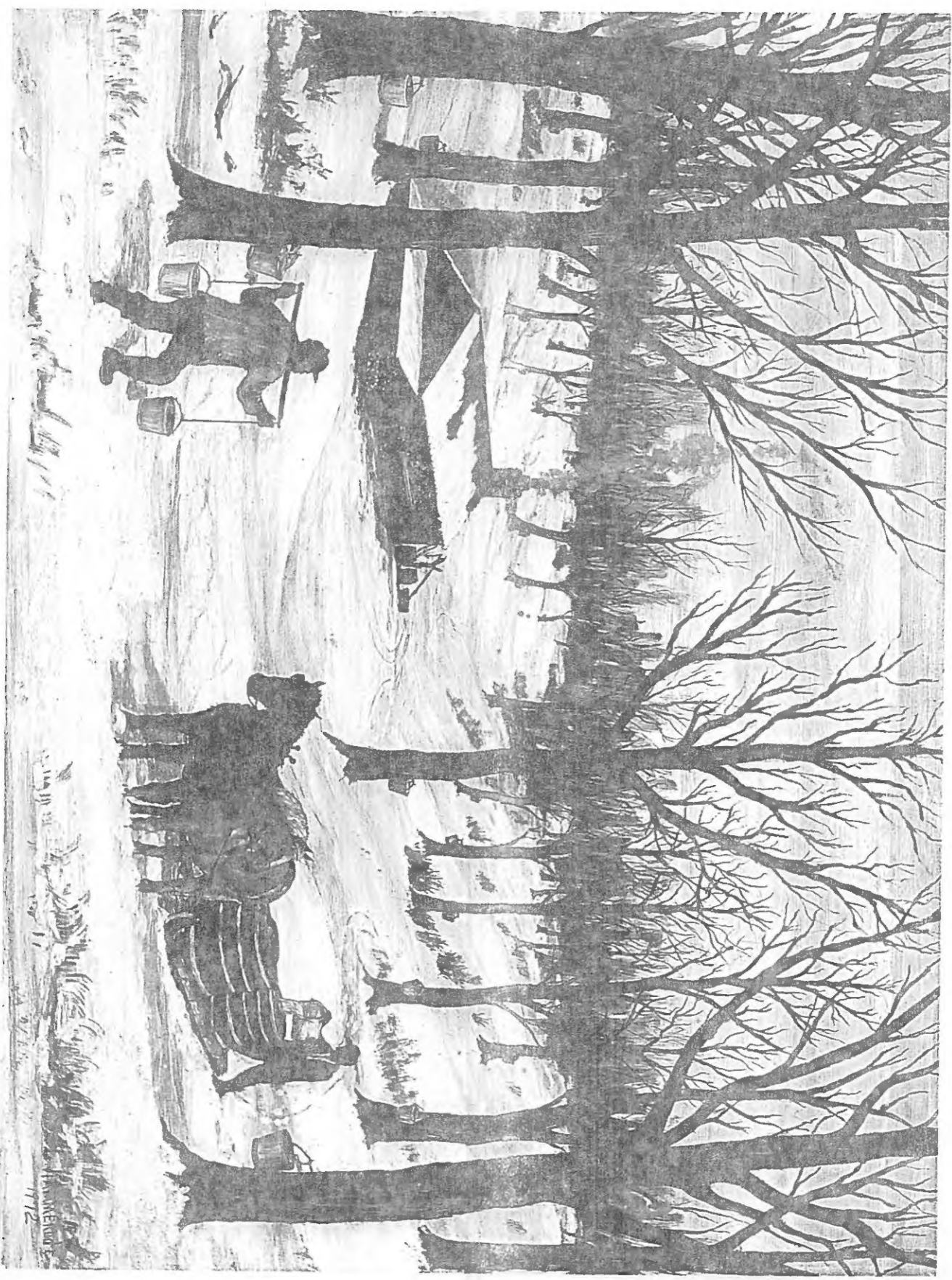
Today's large commercial operations have now gone to miles of plastic tubing to transfer sap to huge evaporating set-ups. Mechanized equipment is used to drill holes and insert sap spouts or "spiles." With these stream-lined methods, Wisconsin now ranks in the top syrup-producing states in the country.

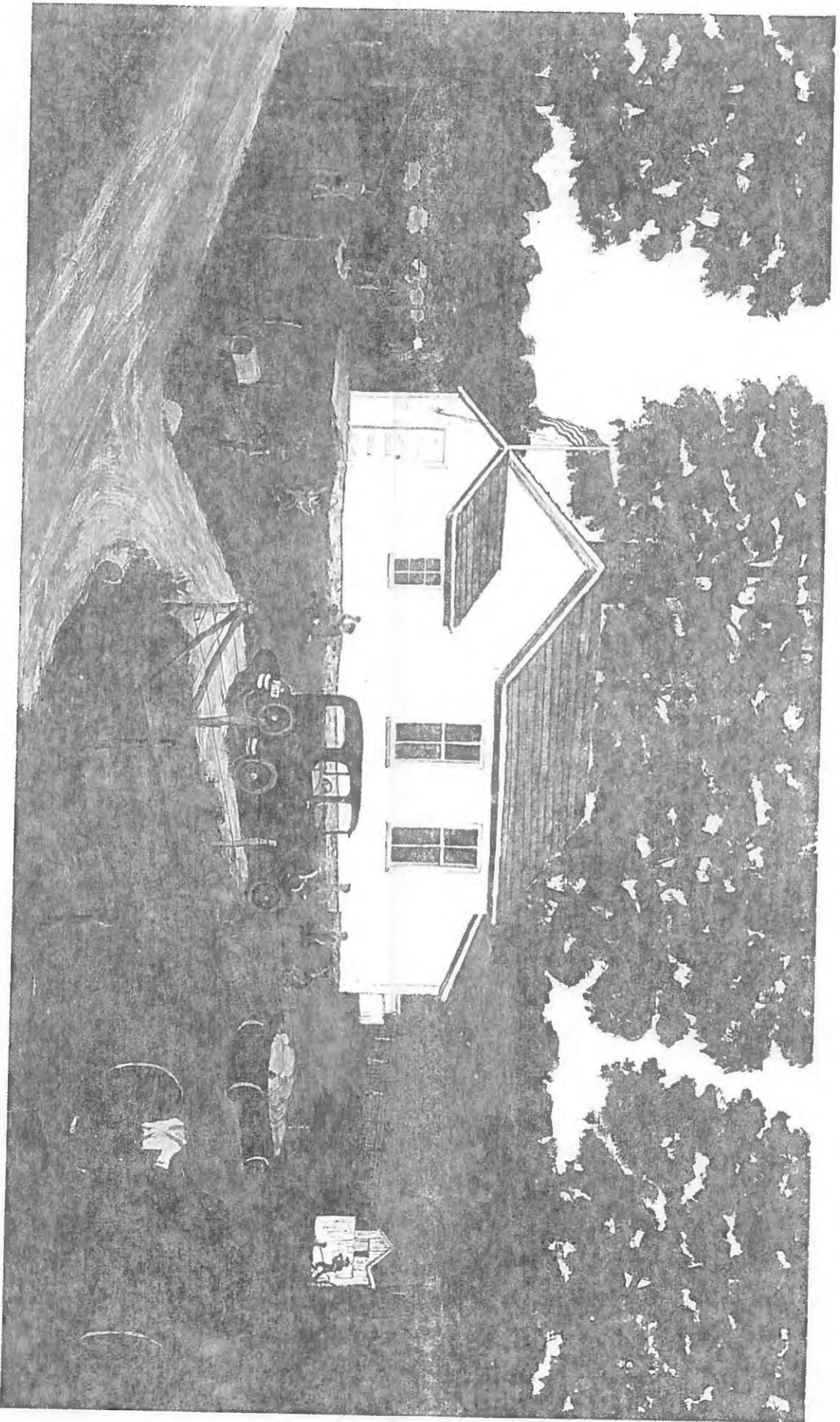
This painting depicts a small commercial operation, possibly around the time of World War I or after. During both World Wars, the local production of maple syrup and maple sugar soared because of sugar rationing. Since then, commercial production has continued strong in northern Wisconsin, while fewer operations still exist in the southern part of the state.

More commonly, farmers in this part of Wisconsin will recall "tapping" only a few trees, pouring buckets of sap into a large container on the old wood kitchen range to cook down. This produced enough syrup to cover many stacks of pancakes. Homemade syrup might last most of the year if the farmer was well prepared for the run and had a good stand of large-sized maple trees.

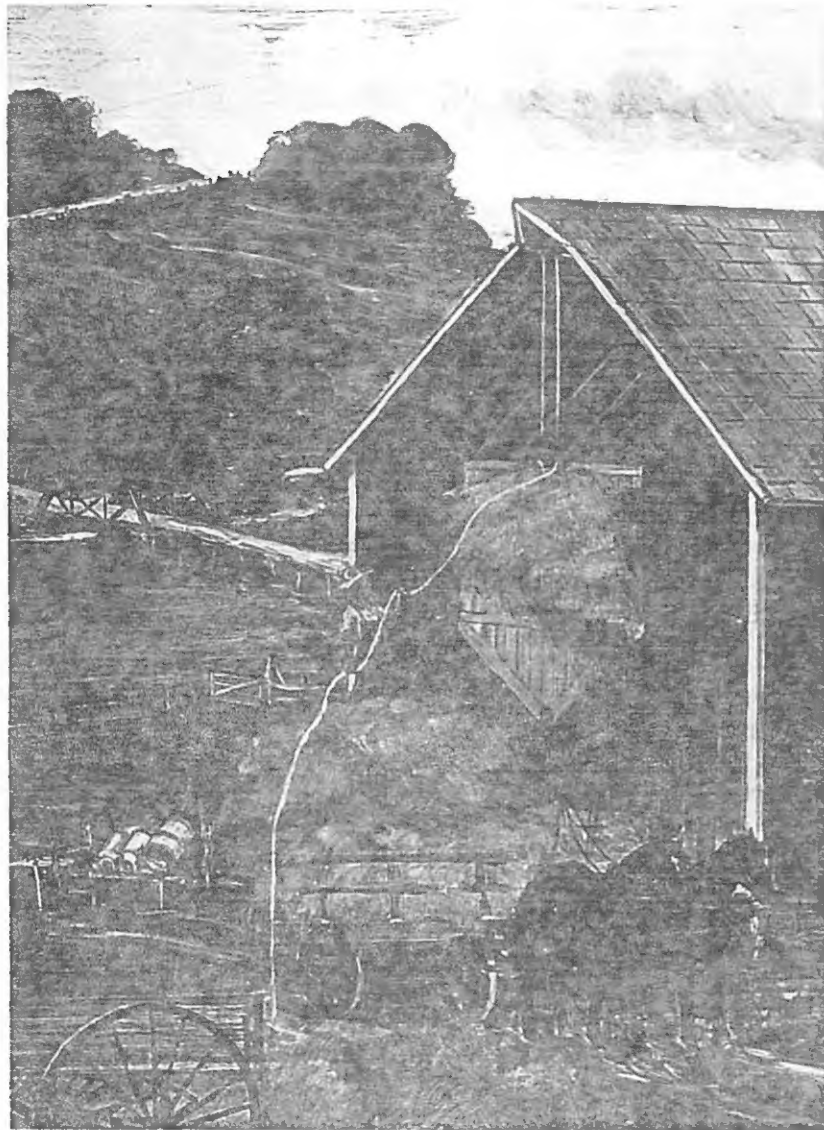
The timing of this operation will not be exactly the same each calendar year. Maple sugaring usually occurs sometime in the period from mid-February through the end of March. The sap begins to flow best when the weather warms well above freezing during the day, yet cools down at night to below freezing. The season stops when the nighttime temperatures no longer fall as low, and leaf buds begin to form on the trees.

Curiously, a south-wind will also bring a temporary stop to the sap's flow, even though the temperature factors are right. A season usually lasts about twenty days, but can be as short as four days, a real disappointment in terms of the amount of syrup produced.









Detail, from *Haying Time*, 1977

These colorful scenes painted by an elder Wisconsin farmer recall the days of threshing rings and family farming in the 1920s and 1930s.

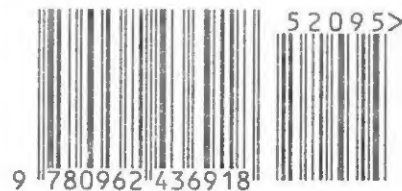
The twenty-one paintings by this self-taught artist, Lavern Kammerude (1915–1989), depict an era of working with horses and rural “neighboring.”

From spring planting to summer haying, from harvest-time through maple sugaring, the seasons of the year are painted with a farmer’s knowing eye.

A delightful text written by another senior farmer tells what is happening in each painting. The stories reveal a wealth of folklore and bygone ways of old-time farming.

This warmly illustrated book is sure to become a prized volume in any family or library collection, to be enjoyed by young and old alike.

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